

# **The need for a ‘true’ National Youth Service in Cameroon**

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## **1. Introduction**

*Economic dependence and cultural diversity are the bedrock upon which the elites of ex-colonial states attempt to construct a functioning state apparatus, a viable economy, and a sense of nationhood to surround and enshrine the emergent order. The achievement of national integration is sought in language and education policies, cultural and ideological programmes, and the structuring of access to and distribution of available resources. It is basically for this reason that a number of governments in the world and Africa in particular require their highly educated youth to spend a year of service to the nation after they leave the university.*

*This contribution thus focuses on the importance and impact of a 'true' National Youth Service (NYS) to Cameroon. Reference is made to the country's National Civic Service for Participation in Development (NCSPD) which is coordinated by the National Civic Youth Agency for Participatory Development (the Agency). Has Cameroon's orientations and attitudes been altered as a result of the NYS in other states? And if so, in what ways? What is the importance of other structures like the*

*Cameroon Rural Financial Corporation and the Cameroon Bank for Small and Medium size enterprises? Are these changes conducive to national integration? In short, is the NCSPD a 'true' National Youth Service? The cases of Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa will be utilised in this contribution, because the NYS in these states have been helpful in curbing unemployment, inequality and social exclusion. The NYS in these states have also contributed in reducing crime and youth gang activity.*

## ***2. A conceptual and theoretical frame work of a National Youth Service***

*National Youth Service (NYS) is a concept that is transformative in nature and is broadly defined as the "involvement of young people in activities which provide benefits to the community whilst developing the abilities of young people through service and learning." Informed by an understanding that: young people are disengaged because of a sense of powerlessness and irrelevance as opposed to apathy or disinterest; overcoming this sense of powerlessness and irrelevance necessitates access to opportunities for participation as individuals as well as a generation; their sense of efficacy increases when they are connected to issues that matter and key civic actors and institutions are encouraged to see young people as valuable resources; and meaningful opportunities to participate must be provided today to secure tomorrow. Thus NYS, as a special government initiative, seeks to add to the enhancement of youth as present and future social capital. An enhanced citizen status of young people means that they can participate meaningfully in the political, social and economic life of the country.*

*The literature on youth service and national integration is vast,<sup>1</sup> and need not be summarised here. M. Weiner categorises five meanings of the concept: the change from cultural diversity to national identifications, the establishment of a central political authority, the linkage of elite and masses, minimum value consensus, and a capacity for action towards a common goal - all thought to be answers to the question of what holds a society and political system together.<sup>2</sup> Integration and nation-building, as aspects of political development, are multi-dimensional, holistic, goal, and process in one. Three main obstacles must be overcome: cultural cleavages among groups, an elite-mass gap, and a separation of sub-national and national identifications, or the absence of national*

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. Claude Ake, *A Theory of Political Integration* (Homewood, Ill., 1975), James S. Coleman and Carl G. Rosberg, Jr. (eds.), *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa* (Berkeley, I 964), Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communications: an inquiry into the foundation of nationality* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966 edn.), P. E. Jacob and J. Toscano (eds.), *The Integration of Political Communities* (New York, 1964), and Claude E. Walsh (ed.), *Modernization* (Belmont, 1971 edn.).

<sup>2</sup>M. Weiner, 'Political Integration and Political Development', in Welch (ed.), *op. cit.* pp. 180-3.

*identities.<sup>3</sup> What needs to be integrated are cultural values and ways of life, political values - specifically authority norms, and these are overlaid and reinforced by cultural diversity - and the hierarchy of identity groups recognised by the individual as important.*

*National consciousness is considered along three dimensions. First of all, self-identification, which includes the degree of preference and commitment to one's own group; identification with the nation and its symbols; nationalistic feelings, a felt difference, and possibly superiority over other comparable groups; and loyalty to the nation - that is, a willingness to make sacrifices for the common good.<sup>4</sup> National identification sustains what Rupert Emerson calls the 'terminal community' which, 'when the chips are down, effectively commands men's loyalty, overriding the claim of the lesser communities within and those which cut across it'.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, cultural diversity, which includes the following elements: tolerance, the salience of cultural differences, the willingness to accept differences among groups, the absence of stereotyping, and communications ability. Thirdly, state acceptance, which involves legitimacy, commitment to order, a sense of citizenship, and perceived equality among members of the nation-state - that is, those attitudes which promote the 'integration of citizens into a common political process', and to 'acceptable procedures for the resolution of conflict'.<sup>6</sup>*

*These goal components of national consciousness - national identification, multi-culturality, public-mindedness - as they exist, promote the process of national integration. An individual is nationally conscious when commitment to his own group does not prevent a salient self-identification as a member of a larger community; when he exhibits tolerance of other groups, minimises differences and stereotypes, and shows a high degree of communications capacity with members of other sub-national groups; and when he has a high esteem of fellow citizens, a willingness to sacrifice personal interests for the public good, and support for the political institutions which govern the nation.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup>I. Narain, 'Cultural Pluralism, National Integration and Democracy in India', in *Asian Survey* (Berkeley), xvi, 10, October 1976, p. 913.

<sup>4</sup>J. Plamenatz defines this as a 'lively sense of, or, perhaps, pride in what distinguishes one's own from other people'; 'Two Types of Nationalism', in E. Kamenka (ed.), *Nationalism* (Canberra, 1973), p. 24. Kamenka, in his contribution *Political Nationalism - the Evaluation of an Idea*, stresses the 'anti-another group' aspects of nationalism.

<sup>5</sup>Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation* (Boston, 1960), pp. 95-6.

<sup>6</sup>Weiner, loc. cit. pp. 182 and 188.

<sup>7</sup>National consciousness does pre-suppose the lessening of cultural diversity, but not its elimination. The essential ingredient for the existence of the nation-state is not a uniformity of cultural or even political values, but the acceptance of an over-arching consensus which prevents the jostle of multiple cultures and loyalties from acquiring the political importance that leads to open conflict. See the arguments in W. Connor, 'Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?', in *World Politics* (Princeton), xxiv, 3, April 1972, pp. 3 19-55; J. W. Elder, 'National Loyalties in a Newly Independent Nation', in David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York,

*A NYS thus stands out as an important medium by which the state seeks to accommodate all the youth of a nation, by instilling in them a sense of patriotism and the spirit of self-consciousness and entrepreneurship. A very important advantage of a NYS is that it seeks to curb social injustice. A NYS is also helpful in curbing unemployment, inequality and social exclusion. Via a NYS there is a reduction in crime and youth gang activity.*

*It is thus important to examine how the NYS has been successful in curbing social injustice, unemployment, inequality and social exclusion in some selected African countries like Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa will be utilised in this contribution. These case studies are examined below.*

### ***3. State practice: comparative experiences of NYS in the world and in Africa in particular***

*In Africa, many states established national service programs during the era of colonial independence in the 1960s and 1970s. Several programs persist to the present day, although often with important changes since inception, as in Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Senegal, and Ghana. Others have been stopped as in Tanzania and Botswana. Namibia launched its national program in 1999, and South Africa adopted its National Youth Service Programme in 2004.*

*Most African NYS programs center on mobilizing young people for national development. Service programs in Africa provide young people with opportunities to become actively involved in the process of nation building. By investing their time, skills, and energy, volunteers make an important contribution to the wellbeing of their communities. Service programs provide an outlet for disenchanted youth to transform relationships within their communal environment, change the policies and values of their nation, and bring hope for the less fortunate members of their communities. In many places, national service programs have also helped to address needs that could not be met in their countries due to the lack of human and material resources.*

*Official thinking on youth employment programmes in Africa began to change after considering the experience of other countries especially the U.S. Peace Corps, Canadian University Service Overseas,*

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1964), pp. 77-92; Otwin Marenin, 'Social Mobilization and Individual Identity: a test of two models', in *Journal of African Studies* (Berkeley), v, 4, Winter 1978, pp. 381-95; R. Melson and H. Wolpe, 'Modernization and the Politics of Communalism: a theoretical perspective', in *The American Political Science Review* (Menasha), 64, December 1970, pp. 11-30; and M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York, 1964).

and U.K. Voluntary Service Overseas - and had shifted towards a more general and 'idealistic' scheme (OtwinMareenin 630).

#### *The case of Nigeria*

*The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in Nigeria started operating in 1973. The kick-off was not as smooth as one would have expected. There was a lot of pessimism especially on the part of academia on the sustainability of this programme. This was coupled with serious unrest. The Government blamed the unrest on 'certain unscrupulous elements in the society' which had misrepresented the proposals to the students. (Mareenin 630). Yet the motivations for the riots must be discerned in the mix of self-interest and public-mindedness which characterises Nigerian university students. Central to their grievances were the uncertainties which surrounded the programme: rumours circulated freely that the term of service would run for two years, that it would involve road-building and other heavy manual tasks, and that the remuneration would be only 60 Naira a month, roughly one-third of what the students had expected to earn in their first year after graduation (Mareenin 630).*

*Amidst great publicity, the N.Y.S.C has since become an established part of governmental and student planning. Decree No. 24 which established the N.Y.S.C. was published on 23 May 1973, and the National Directorate was inaugurated the following month, with Professor Adebayo Adedeji as Chairman and Lieutenant Colonel A. Ali as Director. By mid-1979 about 46,000 had passed through the programme, serving the nation in a variety of jobs, mainly as teachers, before being employed in either the private or public sector.*

*The programme is now seen as a ready if temporary source of educated manpower, rather than a year of service and learning to be a Nigerian, the aims which had been emphasised at the beginning. This manpower is increasingly allocated in a tailor-made fashion to match the skills of the participants and to meet the needs of the nation. Participants are now assigned to such special programmes as legal aid, mobile rural health, engineering, teaching, and a proposed year-long community service effort. The considerable resources which are being invested in the N.Y.S.C. - in salaries alone, about 50 million Naira in 1977-83 - seem to require that the Government must point to specific concrete achievements, rather than claim a more insubstantial and harder-to-prove 'uplifting of the spirit'. (Mareenin634)*

*The N.Y.S.C in Nigeria has thus gone a long way in curbing social injustice, unemployment, inequality and social exclusion. Although there is still youth gang activity in Nigeria, the N.Y.S.C has done a lot to curb such activity in the state.*

#### *The case of Ghana*

*The Ghana National Service Scheme (NSS), a non partisan structure founded in 1973, facilitates the mandatory year of community service for all Ghanaians over age 18 that have completed tertiary-level education. It is an example of the mandatory community service model for university graduates described in Youth Service Program Models. Each year, approximately 50,000 service personnel are enrolled and trained; they deliver vital services across the country in areas such as education, health, governance, and decentralization. Now that the National Volunteer Service has merged with NSS, they are joined annually by 10,000–20,000 volunteers. These volunteers are retired teachers and NSS graduates who commit to contributing their specific expertise to serve community needs. The 2010–2011 academic year included 53,420 service personnel and an additional 10,000 volunteers.*

*The National Service Scheme is widely recognized and respected throughout Ghana. It will be sustainable as long as government continues to recognize and support it as an extension of its efforts. NSS sees youth as agents for change and as valued resources for the country. It connects young people to communities and the challenges they face. It inculcates discipline and civic responsibility in the youth; sharing this with their community service placement has an impact on the people they work with in society. Service participants are respected and are treated as employees/staff where they are placed. Their role is valued and expected; each year, there is more demand for service participants than NSS can provide.*

*The NSS in Ghana has thus gone a long way in curbing social injustice, unemployment, inequality and social exclusion. Although there is still youth gang activity in Ghana, the NSS has done a lot to curb such activity in the state.*

#### *The case of South Africa*

*The Government of the Republic of South Africa adopted a National Youth Service implementation framework in March 2007. One of the objectives of the initiative is to give young people opportunities to develop skills through volunteering. Since the launch, there has been an increase in various government departments' involvement.*

*The National Youth Service in South Africa has consistently been motivated by the South African*

*youth sector as a programmatic vehicle which can respond to the multiple needs of young people and enable them to access new opportunities for employment and income generation, skills development and personal development, while contributing to national objectives for reconstruction and development of South Africa. The principles, values and purpose of a National Youth Service Programme have remained consistent since 1992.*

*The vision of the NYS is the development of youth via furnishing a long-term and effective means of reconstructing the South African society through physical rehabilitation, asset building and renewal of community resources and rebuilding the fabric of communities. The NYS in South Africa fosters a spirit of nation-building by inculcating a culture of service, a common sense of nationhood, engendering a new form of patriotism as well as promoting intergenerational understanding.*

*The National Youth Development Policy Framework (NYDPF) recognized the role that NYS would play in the social mobilisation of young people and capacity building of the youth development sector. According to the NYDPF, youth service initiatives should broadly encompass the following:*

- o Develop skills, knowledge and the ability to make the transition to adulthood, and improve their employability through opportunities for work experience and to provide a vehicle for national development through their deployment to areas of need, specifically at community level, for example in clinics;*
- o Introduction of capacity-building programmes for youth leadership facilitating youth-driven poverty alleviation programmes;*
- o Community service as an integral part of tertiary education curriculum needs to be expanded beyond current community service for doctors; and*
- o Short-term service initiatives in the South African National Defence Force.*

*The NYS in South Africa has thus gone a long way in curbing social injustice, unemployment, inequality and social exclusion. Although there is still youth gang activity in South Africa, the NYS has done a lot to curb such activity in the state.*

#### ***4. Is the National Civic Service Agency for Participatory Development in Cameroon a National Youth Service?***

*The Prime Minister of Cameroon, Philemon Yang, held a cabinet meeting in late 2011. During this meeting, the Minister of Youth Affairs and Civic Education (Youth Affairs) tabled before the ministers*



*in attendance a proposal for some sort of national youth service. In his proposal, the Minister of Youth Affairs first recalled that a first experiment with the civic service was launched in 1973. This structure was called the National Board of Participation in Development and was dissolved in 1990 because of financial difficulties and due to managerial hurdles.*

*During the 2011 cabinet meeting, the Minister of Youth Affairs made reference to the National Civic Service for Participation in Development whose new architecture was enshrined in a law of 13 July 2007. This law assigned to it the role of contributing to bringing together energies to address the country's economic and social development problems and foster in all citizens the national feeling, the sense of discipline, tolerance, general interest, the dignity of work, civic responsibility and the culture of peace. In terms of implementation, it was to be put in place in two phases under the auspices of the National Civic Service of Participation in Development set up by a decree dated the 23 December 2010.*

*The National Civic Service Agency for Participatory Development (the Agency) was finally created in 2012 by Decree no. 2012/086 of 09 March 2012. The Director General of this structure is Dr. Ayuk Etah Oswald Tambe. This Agency is under the tutelage of the Minister of Youth Affairs. According to Chapter 1, section 2 of this Decree, the program is only for youths aged between 17 to 21. Still according to chapter 1, section 2 of this decree, the youths go out for internship for six months. According to Chapter 2 which focuses on modalities of participation, candidates for this program are selected in the capitals of regions and departments, according to the terms and conditions laid down by decree of the Minister of Youths. After their training, volunteers are issued a certificate by the Agency.*

*Also according to the 2012 Decree, candidates may carry out their internship within the structures of the Agency or otherwise, in the facilities of public or private interest. The Agency signs agreements with private and public institutions. The duration of the compulsory period may be extended by the Agency to allow the volunteer to complete an interrupted session because of illness duly certified by a physician or authorized by the public agency, or for any other reason justified and accepted by the Agency. The internship period can also be shortened for personal convenience upon written notice to the Agency.*

*Supervision of candidates is provided by qualified personnel available to the Agency as needed by the government or recruited directly by the Agency. During the period of their commitment to civic*

*participation in national development, volunteers cannot claim any compensation. The Agency shall ensure that volunteers do have appropriate accommodation, clothing, food, transportation, and health coverage.*

*The training of volunteers includes:*

- Training modules in citizenship education, and physical education, sport and culture;*
- A training module for the creation of income-generating activities and self-employment;*
- Educational talks and roundtables on national solidarity and integration;*
- Introductory sessions in community life and local development projects;*
- Seminars and workshops on theoretical and practical first aid, civil protection, environmental protection and sustainable development;*
- Any other activities related to the objectives of the compulsory period.*

*The Agency may also develop cooperative relations with foreign public or private institutions competent in their area of operations in accordance with the regulations.*

*So far, a lot of Cameroonians aged 17 to 21 have been placed by the Agency with several private and public corporations. Most youths this age are placed mainly with agricultural related sectors. This is in a bid to revamp the agricultural sector and trigger self-employment thereafter.*

## ***5. A need for a 'true' National Youth Service in Cameroon?***

*The Agency set up in 2012 is not a 'true' NYS. It is a very partisan structure. There is still no guarantee that the Agency will train youths to be patriotic and to be development actors. Despite the fact that the 2012 law setting up the Agency opens the possibility for partnership with foreign public or private institutions competent in their area of operations in accordance with the regulations, bottlenecks still exist with respect to partnerships that can truly benefit youths especially in the private sector.*

*The private sector is not prosperous in Cameroon especially as taxes remain high. Cultural cleavages among groups still exist and an elite-mass gap still plagues recruitments especially in the public sector. A 'true' NYS is needed to curb such ills.*

*This Agency does not also create the possibility for the diaspora to assist in instilling a sense of patriotism and development in the state of Cameroon. There is need for clarity on bringing in the diaspora on board. A 'true' NYS which is well structured and organised is thus needed. Such a structure will encourage the youth in the diaspora to also join in the state's development.*

*In 2013, the state invested over 30 million Euros in creating two structures: The Cameroon Rural Financial Corporation and the Cameroon Bank for Small and Medium size enterprises. According to the Minister of Finance, these structures are to assist in self-employment especially in agriculture and in the creation of small and medium size enterprise (SME). Via this initiative, the state is also to reduce the importation of basic necessities and encourage local production and consumption.*

*According to many Cameroonians, the creation of the Agency is not a laudable idea. How far are we sure that this Agency will not collapse as the experiment launched in 1973?*

*Another canker worm eating into the fabric of the Cameroonian society is corruption. How are the youths to be selected? How are youths to benefit from loans from the Cameroon Rural Financial Corporation and the Cameroon bank for Small and Medium size enterprises? These are the many doubts that hover around the Agency.*

*In the first place there was no consultation with the diaspora, with the private sector, with Academia as well as civil society on the creation of the Agency and its mandate. This is why the country needs a 'true' NYS which will reflect the true needs of youths who continue to languish in poverty. There is no need imposing a structure such as the Agency on the youths of Cameroon which is bound to fail.*

## *6. Conclusion*

*A National Youth service has important contributions to make to countries in the developing world especially Cameroon. Service programs help build the leadership and civic engagement skills of the youth who participate, while they contribute to grass roots community development efforts that are an essential part of nation building. Like in the case of Nigeria, Ghana and South Arica, Cameroon needs a NYS that can curb social injustice, unemployment, inequality and social exclusion.*

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